



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 23, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, the United States is very alarmed by the reported decision on September 16 by the Belarusian Ministry of Justice to file a lawsuit aimed at closing the Belarus Helsinki Committee.

This is just the latest example of the longstanding persecution of the Belarus Helsinki Committee and of the Government of Belarus' refusal to uphold its OSCE commitments to democracy and human rights.

As the United States pointed out in its September 9 statement to the PC, the Belarus Helsinki Committee was in recent months twice absolved by Belarusian courts of tax evasion charges. Yet, despite this, the Ministry of Justice announced that it would continue to investigate the Committee and audit its finances.

The Justice Ministry's disregard for these court rulings vindicating the Belarus Helsinki Committee reveals its lack of interest in rule-of-law based on democratic principles and its political motivation in pursuing this new lawsuit.

The United States is especially concerned that the move to close the Belarus Helsinki Committee may have been prompted by its public questioning of the legality of the October 17 referendum on eliminating presidential term limits.

The questioning of the legality of the referendum is a legitimate act of political discourse.

Inevitable claims by the Belarusian government that the Belarus Helsinki Committee failed to fulfill - some administrative requirements enjoy very little credibility because of the clear pattern of manipulating legal technicalities to suppress voices critical of the government.

In the Charter for European Security adopted in Istanbul in 1999, the government of Belarus agreed that "Non-governmental organizations can perform a vital role in the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law."

Belarus further pledged "to enhance the ability of NGOs to make their full contribution to the further development of civil society and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

We therefore call on the Belarusian government to adhere to the spirit and letter of the Charter for European Security and numerous other OSCE commitments to facilitate and encourage NGO activities, especially those conducted by organizations, like the Belarus Helsinki Committee, expressly dedicated to our common OSCE ideals.

Belarus can do so by immediately aborting the Ministry of Justice lawsuit and refraining from further harassment of the Belarus Helsinki Committee and all other democracy and human rights NGOs.

The United States is also deeply concerned by the rejection of so many candidate applications to run for Parliament in the October 17 election. The rejections have disproportionately affected individuals associated with the opposition.

Once again, a pattern is evident of alleging infractions of minor administrative requirements to give a veneer of legitimacy to politically motivated decisions.

The United States notes that roughly 150 persons have filed appeals. We urge the Central Election Commission to reverse politically motivated rejections of candidate applications in the currently ongoing appeals process.

Mr. Chairman, the United States welcomes the invitation extended by Belarusian Foreign Minister Martynov to ODIHR to observe the referendum on abolishing presidential term limits.

However, it has little meaning when the government of Belarus blocks human rights NGOs from contributing to democratic discourse, stifles independent media's ability to provide a forum for alternative viewpoints and uses spurious references to rule-of-law to block the opposition from running for office.

Thank you.